Religion and the Limits of Modern Rationalism

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Part 1 What is religion?
Three Positions
Uncritical acceptance
Rejection
Critical acceptance
Part 2 James' Position
Religion vs. Science
Religion as Psychologically Necessary
An Incoherence in James' Analysis
A Deeper Coherence
Part 3 Otto's Position
The Numinous: What It Isn't
The Numinous: What It Is
Awe and Terror
The Numinous as Projection of Passivity
Part 4 Eliade's Position
The Sacred and the Profane
Linear vs. Circular Time
Part 5 Writing as the Basis of Rationalism
Economies of Scale Responsible for Time-linearization
Religion as Early-stage Rationalism
Writing and Rationality
Part 6 Spiritualism and Religion
Religion Not what James, Otto, and Eliade are Examining
Spiritualism and Religion
Part 7 James, Otto, and Eliade on the Limits of Rationalism
James, Otto, and Eliade on Rationalism
James, Otto, and Eliade on Spiritualism
Conclusion: What Do These Authors Propose?

Part 1 What is religion?

Three Positions

What is religion, and does it have any legitimacy? There are many different answers to each of these questions, but ultimately any given answer to either question embodies one of three attitudes:

1. One of uncritical acceptance, such as we would presumably find among people living 3,500 years ago;
2. One of rejection, such as we would find in someone, such as Freud, whose career involved examining religion, and therefore making an object out of it, as opposed to *having* religion; or
3. One of critical and reflective acceptance, such as we find in William James, Rudolph Otto, and Mircea Eliade, these being scholars who took it upon themselves to supplement critical scientific rationalism, such as we find in Freud, with firsthand knowledge of the experiences involved in being religious.

In the present work, the views of James, Otto, and Eliade will be stated, compared, contrasted, and evaluated. It will be found that they have much the same view as to the emotional basis of religion and also as to its psychological function. In their view, the essence of religious sentiment is that this world is not all that there is and, moreover, that one cannot *fail* to have this view while retaining psychological health. Each of these authors acknowledges that there exist psychologically healthy, self-identified agnostics and atheists; but they also hold that such individuals, whether they know it or not, hold some variant of the view just described. They also hold that

when people genuinely do not have this view, they succumb to various different forms of psychological morbidity.

It must be stated at the outset that, when these authors refer to "religion", they are typically referring to its subjective, emotional side, not to its objective, institutional side. At the same time, none of these authors is referring to the mindset of someone who, in the 21st century, describes himself as "spiritual." For reasons to be discussed, the person who self-describes as "spiritual" is in much the same category as a self-described atheist. 21st Century 'spiritualism', so these authors would say, is just another manifestation of contemporary nihilism and is therefore not an expression of the *actual* spiritualism that these authors have in mind but of its absence.

Let us start by describing the previously mentioned attitudes of uncritical acceptance, rejection, and critical acceptance.

Uncritical acceptance

Someone is genuinely uncritically accepting of religion if they don't even know of the possibility of not accepting it. It is not possible for a member of any contemporary society to have this attitude. So-called "fundamentalists" are not uncritically accepting of religion. A contemporary Christian or Moslem fundamentalists *chooses* to be a fundamentalist. He lives in a society of non-fundamentalists; he has access to books, newspapers, and websites that represent views antithetical to his own. The contemporary fundamentalist is *reacting* to non-religious views and to religious but non-fundamentalists views. By contrast, the spiritualism of the stone age tribesman is not a reaction, that is to say, it is not a defense against some other view.

Moreover, the tribesman's views do not represent mere credulity or acquiescence to some set of social norms. In believing that some bolt of lightning represents the wrath of a higher being, he isn't acquiescing to social norms or to a charismatic leader. He believes it because *it is how he naturally sees the world*, not

because he has been taught that this is how he *should* see the world. The contemporary fundamentalist is in a very different category: his beliefs are the result of a long process of acculturation, usually accompanied by considerable internal struggle.

Rejection

There are two very different forms of religious rejectionism: the authentic kind and the inauthentic kind. An example of the authentic kind is someone, e.g. Freud, who genuinely has a rationalistic world view and, on that basis, simply doesn't accept a religious world view.

An example of the inauthentic kind is anyone whose rejectionism is simply a way of fitting in or moving ahead. People often join atheist groups because they want to fit in with others or because they believe membership in such a group to be a source of prestige. This form of rejectionism is presumably a historical *consequence* of the work of authentic rejectionists—as in, the latter changed our worldview in such a way as to make a non-religious view be socially normal—but the mentality involved is much closer that involved in religious fundamentalism than it is to that involved in authentic, rationalism-based rejectionism.

In most cases, today's atheist or secular humanist is simply following the herd, just as the true-believer was one thousand years ago, and his views are likely to be equally dogmatic. So even if *what* the contemporary atheist believes is more reasonable than what a medieval peasant believes, his reasons for believing it may well be equally emotional and equally spurious. Indeed, the brain-centers that mediate 'militant' atheism are identical with those that mediate religious fundamentalism.

Critical acceptance

There are two ways to be reflective about religion: reductively and non-reductively. Freud was reductively reflective about religion. In his view, God represents the father, and religion exists to mediate various biological and social

functions (e.g. preventing incest, directing aggression towards appropriate targets, and inculcating superego). William James was non-reductively rational about religion. He didn't deny that religions served (or used to serve) various social functions. Nor did he deny that religion was amenable to eliminative explanations of the kind that Freud would later provide. His position is not so much that those positions are wrong as it is that they are incomplete. There are indeed reductionist truths about religion, James grants, but there are also non-reductionist truths; and, so he claims, it is truths of the non-reductionist kind that the very essence of religion lies.

It is important to note that there are, or at least could be, both reductive *and* non-reductive truths about religion. James himself makes this point. Religion is a psychological phenomenon and can be examined as such. It can be said why people are religious, just as it can be said why people do science. It could well be that Newton poured himself into his scientific researches as a way of fleeing from painful childhood memories, and it might well be that Martin Luther's religious fervor is to be explained in much the same way. But, as James himself says, the psychological backstory is not always the whole story. Scientific positions must be understood on their own terms, and it is at least possible that the same is true of religious positions. Consequently, even if everything Freud says about religion is correct—even if God is simply a personification of superego and even if 'holy injunctions' are mere defenses against incestuous urges---it doesn't follow that religion is *nothing other* than a giant neurosis. Supposing that Smith becomes a medical researcher because he suffers from terrible asthma, it doesn't follow that his researches are *nothing but* expressions of asthma-related distress. Similarly, supposing that Martin Luther turned to God because his own father abandoned him as a child, it doesn't follow that his subsequent religious activity is *nothing but* an expression of anguish over not having had a father.

Of course, it will be said that, whereas science has both subjective and objective sides, religion is *pure* subjectivity, there being nothing real corresponding to the various psychological phenomena involved in it. But, of course, this is precisely what James, Otto, and Eliade question, and it is to their work that we now turn.

In what follows, we will use the term 'perceptible world' to refer to the world *qua* entity that can be known through our senses and through scientific examination of the data thereby made available to us. It must be borne in mind that, in this context, 'perceptible' means 'knowable either through our senses or through rational inference from what our senses disclose to us.'

Part 2 James' position
Religion vs. Science

According to James, the essence of religion is that the perceptible world is not the whole world, since an 'invisible order' suffuses and undergirds the perceptible world, giving it meaning and moral structure:

> Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.[1]

This quotation explained: According to the scientific rationalist, the world is just a machine, consisting of so many parts governed by so many mechanisms, and is

to be understood in much the same way as a machine. According to religion, says James, this is *not* the case, since the world known to us through our science is not *all* there is, the reason being there *also* exists an 'invisible order' that suffuses the perceptible Moreover, this invisible order gives the world meaning and it gives individual human beings a purpose. A given person's life is meaningful to the extent that he is on the right side of this 'invisible order' and meaningless to the extent that he is on the wrong side of it.

Religion as Psychologically Necessary

Notice that, in this particular quotation, James is expressing a value-judgment; he is just saying what, in his view, the essence of religion is. But it is the very purpose of this work of James to express a value-judgment about this conceit: and that judgment is that *even if it is false, we benefit from believing it to be true*. James' argument is that, even if God does not in fact exist, belief in God gives one a certain measure of God-like strength. In a word—believing it makes it real:

> We can act AS IF there were a God; feel AS IF we were free; consider Nature AS IF she were full of special designs; lay plans AS IF we were to be immortal; and we find then that these words do make a genuine difference in our moral life. Our faith THAT these unintelligible objects actually exist proves thus to be a full equivalent in *praktischer Hinsicht*, as Kant calls it, or from the point of view of our action, for a knowledge of WHAT they might be, in case we were permitted positively to conceive them. So we have the strange phenomenon, as Kant

> assures us, of a mind believing with all its strength in the real presence of a set of things of no one of which it can form any notion whatsoever. [2]

In and of itself, this passage only says that the consequences of belief in God are in some respects interchangeable with those of God's actually existing; it does not say what those consequences are or whether they are good. But one page later, James says that belief in God gives us strength and is therefore good:

> The sentiment of reality can indeed attach itself so strongly to our object of belief that our whole life is polarized through and through, so to speak, by its sense of the existence of the thing believed in, and yet that thing, for purpose of definite description, can hardly be said to be present to our mind at all. It is as if a bar of iron, without touch or sight, with no representative faculty whatever, might nevertheless be strongly endowed with an inner capacity for magnetic feeling; and as if, through the various arousals of its magnetism by magnets coming and going in its neighborhood, it might be consciously determined to different attitudes and tendencies. Such a bar of iron could never give you an outward description of the agencies that had the power of stirring it so

> strongly; yet of their presence, and of their significance for its life, it would be intensely aware through every fibre of its being. [3]

And therein lies the basic message of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (TVRE), to wit: Strength comes from belief, and weakness from doubt.

An Incoherence in James' Analysis

There is a deep incoherence in what James is saying. One cannot derive strength from a belief that one doesn't have. So if someone who doesn't believe in God is to derive strength from such a belief, he must *make* himself have that belief and therefore make himself believe what he doesn't really believe. But if he does that, he is making himself weaker, not stronger, since he is undermining the integrity of his own belief-system and also therefore of any other psychological faculties of his whose integrity depends on that of his belief-system.

A Deeper Coherence

But there is a coherent point beneath this incoherent one. The basic message of TVRE is not exactly that we *should* believe in a higher power. It is rather that, whether we know it or not, our motivations, emotional dispositions, and values are hewed to the presumption that there is a God who superintends a moral order. The self-identified true believer consciously and explicitly affirms that this presumption, and the self-identified disbeliever denies them. But even though their *theories* differ, says James, their emotional architectures do not, and in each case the psychological faculty responsible for affect, emotion, and motivation is that of the true believer:

> Nevertheless, if we look on man's whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from their learning and science, and

> that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it of which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial. It is the part that has the prestige undoubtedly, for it has the loquacity, it can challenge you for proofs, and chop logic, and put you down with words. But it will fail to convince or convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions.[4]

James then says that the well-springs of intuition, and indeed of what we might call *genius*, lie in this subterraneous psychological realm:

> If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely KNOWS that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it.[5]

It is in the context of these points that James' discussion of mysticism is to be understood. According to James, mystical experiences are 'ineffable', 'transient', and

'passive'; and they are also experienced as being 'noetic', i.e. as being instances of knowledge, as opposed to feeling. What this suggests is that mystical experiences are about *letting go* and letting one's 'real feelings', for lack of a better term, rise to the surface. Strikingly, people who take nitrous oxide, as James himself points out, have mystical experiences (or experiences similar thereto), and so do people who take LSD. Nitrous oxide and LSD are both disinhibitory agents, meaning that they deregulate the flow of chemical information between synapses; and this fact obviously confirms the hypotheses that mystical experiences are about disinhibition, as does the fact that *anti*psychotic medications are inhibitory agents.

In conclusion, James' position seems to be that it is not really up to us whether or not to 'believe', since belief is built into our psychological structure. James is not making the absurd point that someone living now should have the same *theories* as someone living 12,000 years ago. Rather is making the non-absurd point that however much our theories may change, the beliefs that are etched into our unchanging human essence are closer to those of the religious than of the non-religious person.

Part 3 Otto's Position

The Numinous: What It Isn't

Otto's position is that the essence of religious sentiment is the sense that the world is suffused by a presence that cannot possibly be known through rational inquiry, let alone sense-perception. Otto refers to this hidden presence as 'the numinous' (from *numen*: Latin fo*r divine or awesome presence*). In order to understand what the numinous is, says Otto, we must be very clear about what it *isn't.*

God, conceived of as a kind of super-person, is *not* the numinous. Quite the contrary, says Otto. If God is conceived of as an ogre who lives on Mt. Olympus, then there is nothing mysterious about him, and he is therefore the very opposite of numinous. Much the same holds if God is conceived of as being utterly rational and

powerful and just; for thus conceived, God is basically a person, albeit one free of the usual limitations, and there is therefore nothing mysterious or 'numinous' about him. For this reason, Otto says that, if indeed God is hyper-intelligent, hyper-just, and the like, those are merely "synthetical" attributes of his, meaning that it is not in virtue of his having them that he is God. To be God is not to be a superman but is rather to be the 'numinous' presence that pervades the world.

Also, the numinous is not to be identified with the *miraculous.* For a miracle to occur is for a sapient being to create breach of natural law. The supposition that a sapient being is violating natural law is simply another hypothesis; and were that hypothesis to prove correct, it would not be a rejection of a rationalist world view but a mere modification of the way such a world view is applied. Consequently, the miraculous is not identical with, or even necessarily an expression of, the numinous.

The Numinous: What It Is

Otto does not quite say the numinous is, but he identifies some of its key attributes:

*The numinous is either *awe inspiring* or *terrifying* (more on this below).

*Awareness of it involves a state of *fascination*—meaning that involves a state of rapt interest in it and also of absorption of oneself into it.

*In being aware of it, one has a sense of one's smallness and, for that reason, of there being a larger cosmic order.

*We encounter the numinous when we listen to good music, and also when we experience romantic and erotic attachments.

*The awe inspired by natural phenomena in those who are not jaded by scientific rationalism involves their being aware of the numinous.

*The numinous is holy, a corollary (one not explicitly drawn by Otto) being that its existence imposes moral obligations on human beings and also gives them a sense of purpose.

Awe and Terror

The numinous inspires *awe* or *terror*, says Otto. I know that bears are dangerous, but I also understand them, since, being mammals, they are basically four-legged versions of myself, and I am therefore not *terrified* of them. I *am* terrified of creatures, such as sharks and tarantulas, that I know to be dangerous and that are totally alien to me. If I became a marine biologist and came to understand such creatures, they would to that extent cease to terrify me, though I would still be duly afraid of them.

Similarly, I am not awed by someone who runs faster than myself, since there is nothing mysterious to me about being able to run a 100-yard dash in 11 seconds, as opposed to twelve seconds. I *would* be awed by somebody who could paint an entire landscape in perfect detail from memory, since, not having artistic talent myself, I would not quite understand what was involved in his having this ability. But if I myself developed this ability, or at least learned what was involved in this other person's having it, I would cease to be awed by his having it.

The awe-inspiring and the terrifying are what we perceive to be supernatural. If vampires existed, they would be *inherently* terrifying, since, because they would be supernatural, mere mortals could not possibly ever understand them. And superheroes, if they existed, would be inherently awe-inspiring for the same reason *mutatis mutandis.* Sharks and tarantulas are terrifying to people who do not understand them and to whom they therefore might as well be supernatural, and they are not terrifying to those who study them scientifically and for whom they are therefore mere natural phenomena. Great art is awe-inspiring to those who have no idea how it comes into existence, and to whom it therefore has a supernatural quality, but not to great artists, who do have such an idea and to whom it therefore has no such quality.

The Numinous as Projection of Passivity

Otto never quite says what the numinous is. He says what it isn't, and he lists off a few of its key attributes. But he can't quite define it. The reason for this, contrary to what Otto himself says, is not that the numinous is inherently indefinable. It is rather that Otto is treating as an objective being—one that lies outside of ourselves—when the truth is that it is obviously a psychological projection of some kind, and the question 'what is the numinous?' is a psychological, not a metaphysical question.

When trying to form a clear conception of the numinous, the relevant question is: When do people experience it and when don't they experience it? The answer is: They experience it when they have their guard down. The savage's relationship to nature is one of openness and passive wonder. When one is listening to music, one is in a state of disinterested contemplation. Erotic and romantic attachments involve a condition of surrender.

The tie-in to James is clear. James points out that people under the influence of drugs have experiences similar to those of the mystical variety, the reason being that such experiences are about passivity, as opposed to activity. The scientist's attitude to nature is not one of passive wonder but of active deconstruction, and the forester's attitude towards nature is one of *literal* deconstruction, this being why there is nothing numinous about nature for either. For the savage, nature is not to be mastered but passively experienced, this being why he experiences it as numinous.

Part 4 Eliade's Position

The Sacred and the Profane

According to Eliade, the essence of a genuinely religious person's relation to the world is that he sees it as being either *sacred* or *profane*. Unlike the scientist, he does not see as it *impersonal.* The more genuinely religious a person is, the less he sees it as a mere machine, and the more likely he is to see a rock or twig or bolt of lightning as a manifestation of a beneficent higher presence, and therefore as 'sacred', or of a maleficent such presence, and therefore as 'profane.' The less religious a

person is, the more he sees it as a mere machine, and the less likely he is to see a rock or a twig as anything other than a rock or a twig.

Linear vs. Circular Time

According to Eliade, primitive man, this being the most religious kind of man, conceives of time as circular. He does not see it as a linear march away from a past that becomes ever more remote. On the contrary, he sees time as being like the seasons. Indeed, his conception of time is very likely modeled on the seasons. As a matter of anthropological fact, Eliade is right that this is how human beings initially conceived of time.

We obviously now conceive of time as being linear, meaning that at some point our conception of time underwent a major shift. According to Eliade, it was Abrahamic religion that brought about this shift. Such religions, says Eliade, involve defining events (e.g. God speaking to Abraham, Moses being given the Ten Commandments, or Jesus turning water into wine); and because these events are of such singular significance, making it impossible for them to be duplicated, the march of time is necessarily a march *away* from them and must therefore follow a linear path.

Part 5 Writing as the Basis of Rationalism
Economies of Scale Responsible for the Time-linearization

Contrary to what Eliade alleges, the shift from a cyclical to a linear conception of time couldn't possibly be a consequence of the advent of Judaism. First of all, it occurred independently in the Orient. Second, it occurred in the West prior to the advent of Judaism. The actual cause of this shift, in both the West and East, was the creation of the *written word.* This occurred in Mesopotamia approximately 6,000 years ago.[6] Hash marks in clay were used to keep inventory, and this system of

record keeping was then so generalized as to be able to represent arithmetical operations and also to be able to record the written word. Once the written word was established, it quickly led to the development of economies of scale and to the development of legal systems sufficiently complex to maintain such economies.

It may well be that a cyclical conception of time retained a certain hold on literate pre-Abrahamic peoples, such as the Mesopotamians and the Egyptians. It may be, for example, that such a view is present in their myths. (Indeed, we will argue below that myths of their very nature presuppose such a conception of time.) And it may be that such a view is advocated in their 'official' theological works. But as soon as there were written records, time came to be thought of as linear. This is a matter of historical fact.

And the explanation is obvious. With the written word, and the concomitant development of economies of scale, *history came into existence.* Functionally speaking, the life of a precivilizational person *was* cyclical. Each year was like the last. There were no technological changes and no economic development. And, of course, there were no written records and there was therefore no well-defined moment that receded into the past: no 'year zero'--no 1492 or 1776. 'History' extended no further than one's personal memory.

Of course, children were told myths, and myths necessarily concern events that, if they actually occurred, did so in the past. But the events described in myths are better thought of as occurring in a hypothetical time; for it makes little sense to suppose that the events in Little Red Riding Hood preceded those in Jack in the Bean Stalk by 17 years or by 112 years. In general, it makes little sense to conceive of a series of *actual* events linking the events in some myth to events external to that myth. Myths therefore do not represent historical consciousness of history. On the contrary, they represent an *ahistorical* consciousness of lessons learned in a historical past.

Writing was invented at approximately the same time that Judaism came into existence, this likely being what through Eliade off. Writing was invented first. As a result, it became possible for Moses to introduce writing to the Israelites, this being Judaism's inaugural event (mythologically represented as God etching commandments into a tablet). Being a consequence of the written word, Judaism is the effect, not the cause, of the linearization of time.

Religion as Early-stage Rationalism

A civilization involves an economy of scale, along with complex legal and political arrangements. None of this can exist in the absence of rationalism. Small scale tribal organizations can exist in the absence of rationalism—and indeed depend on its absence. But where there is civilization, there are necessarily arrangements that are not strictly instinct-based or emotion-driven and that can be sustained only on the basis of rationalism-based social engineering.

What Eliade describes as a shift from one kind of religion to another—what he describes as a shift from pre-Abrahamic to Abrahamic religions—is not a shift *between* religions at all. It is a shift from *spiritualism* to *religion*, spiritualism being the outlook of the precivilizational person and religion being the way that spiritualism is compatibilized with early-stage civilization. Judaism did not officially begin until norms of conduct were written down and codified; and those norms *had* to be codified, since unwritten understandings wouldn't be capable of governing such a large and internally differentiated group. Christianity and Islam may have started out is informal movements that were governed more by sentiments than by codified norms. But they did not become full-blown religions until, like Judaism, they developed, and indeed identified with, complex legal and legalistic norms of conduct.

Consequently, religion is not so much pre-rationalism or anti-rationalism as it is early-stage rationalism; it is not so much non-rationalism as it is the rationalism of early civilizations. As for what we *now* refer to as 'rationalism', that is *late*-stage

rationalism—the rationalism of a civilization whose investigations into nature have started to acquire the same degree of logical rigor as the legal and economic norms involved in societies of scale.

Writing and Rationality

Intelligence is about making judgments about the world. (A fox is behaving intelligently if it correctly judges when to pounce on a rabbit.) Rationality is about making judgments about one's intelligence. (I am being rational if I judge that a career in engineering would be a better use of my mathematical talents than a career as a bookmaker.) Can individuals be rational without being literate? Probably, but the written word certainly makes it easier than it would otherwise be for individuals to be intelligent. Can illiterate societies be rationally structured? Probably, but a literate society is able to do more in the way of rationally structuring itself than an illiterate one.

In the West, our conception of time became linear at about the same time that the first Abrahamic faith came into existence. Eliade deduces from this that Abrahamism was *responsible* for the linearization of our time-concept. But this is simply false, given that there were many pre-Abrahamic civilizations—some of them dating back to 8,000 B.C.---whose conceptions of time were quite as linear as ours.

Chapter 6 Spiritualism and Religion

Religion Not what James, Otto, and Eliade are Examining

When James, Otto, and Eliade refer to 'religion', they are not referring to religion at all, but rather to precivilizational spiritualism. Members of any given Abrahamic faith, or indeed of any religion unambiguously worthy of the name, tend to have worldviews that are largely indistinguishable from those of ardent rationalists. Yes—a fundamentalist Christian seems to have a few beliefs here and there that his non-religious counterpart does not have.

But, first of all, is this really true? Does the contemporary fundamentalist Christian *really* believe that Christ walked on water? Does he believe it in the same sense in which he believes that he is a person or that fish live in water? Or is it rather that this so-called belief of his is more of a *posit* whose purpose is not so much to be true as it is to emblematize a set of values?

Second, and more importantly, even if the fundamentalist Christian *actually* believes that Christ walked on water and rose from the dead, his understanding of the world is almost entirely identical with that of his non-religious counterpart. He doesn't think that there are little people in his radio who are responsible for the noises it makes; he doesn't think that every other twig and rock that he comes upon is a magic omen. His animism is confined to a small and tightly bounded collection of relics concerning alleged past miracles and the like, which relics—though obviously false and absurd if considered as representations of historical fact—are used in a very controlled and, indeed, rational way.

For example, the Amish have many beliefs, for lack of a better term, about Moses, Jesus, God, and Virgin Birth that, if considered on their own, are obviously absurd but that the Amish use as the basis for extremely stable social arrangements, thanks to which the Amish work relatively short hours, live relatively long lives, have relatively happy marriages, and whose communities are virtually crime free.

The Amish, despite having different values from ordinary 'seculars', like myself, see the world in the same way. If I see a rock, they see a rock; and if they see a twig, I see a twig. Unlike the precivilizational spiritualist, they don't beat their amulets when angry, they don't see tree-branches blowing in the wind as angry monster-arms.

Spiritualism and Religion

If the Amish aren't religious, who is? So when James, Otto, and Eliade talk about 'religion', they cannot possibly be using this term correctly. Religious people—such as the Amish and Hasidim---are no more likely than others to have 'ineffable' experiences of 'numinous' apparitions. They are no more likely than others to see rocks as beating monster-hearts. What *is* likely is they used to have such beliefs but no longer do, these former beliefs of theirs having long since hardened into mere acceptances or posits that function as foils for rationally worked out ethical and legal codes.

When they refer to religion, what James, Otto, and Eliade are referring to is precivilizational *spiritualism.* They are referring to the mindset of somebody for whom rationalism was simply not an option. They are not referring to acceptance of some legalistic code of conduct that happens to contain a few throwbacks to spiritualism; they are not referring to the likes of Christianity and Islam, which, though occasionally referencing a snake that turned into a serpent or a talking bush, are complex and internally consistent behavioral codes that stabilize relations between man and woman, parent and child, employer and employee, and buyer and seller. The most die-hard fundamentalist Christian uses the internet and has a refrigerator and pays his taxes. His values may be slightly different from those of his neighbor, but his factual beliefs, with rare and dubious exceptions, are the same. The mentality that James, Otto, and Eliade are describing is not religious, but animistic.

Granting that Otto, James, and Eliade should not have used the term 'religion' to refer to mindset they had in mind, it does not follow that what they said is false—only that they could have worded it more clearly.

So what *did* they say?

To this we now turn.

Part 7 James, Otto, and Eliade on the Limits of Rationalism

James, Otto, and Eliade on Rationalism

Rationalism begins when spiritualism ends.

For the rationalist, there world is so many moving parts. There is nothing magical or mysterious about it. Yes, there is much that the rationalist doesn't know and knows that he doesn't know. But for the rationalist, unknowns are just gaps in his knowledge. They are not mysteries.

For the rationalist, some parts of the world are useful, others are harmful, and others are neither. But nothing is sacred, and nothing is profane.

For the rationalist, morality has to do with utility, not with divinity. Some legal codes work better than others; they lead to lower crime rates, higher GDPs, and the like. But that's the end of it.

For the rationalist, there is indeed morality, but there is no *higher* morality. Morality is another branch of engineering.

For the rationalist, the world is impersonal. It is not a living being. It is just so much dead matter. There do existing living organisms, and a few of those are sentient. But for the rationalist, life, especially of the sentient variety, is an anomaly and must therefore be explained, with the qualification that 'explaining' it means reconciling its existence to an otherwise dead and non-sentient universe.

For the rationalist, the world is an object.

It exists only to be used.

The rationalist sometimes cloaks his instrumentalist conception of nature by taking the position that he wants to *understand* the world, not use it.

But to understand the world is to dissect it mentally, usually in furtherance of doing so literally.

James, Otto, and Eliade on Spiritualism

For the spiritualist, the world is a subject.

For the spiritualist, the world, though having its uses, does not exist *only* to be used. It is more of a partner than an object. And, like a partner, it is teeming with life, and gives one's life meaning.

For the spiritualist, morality is emotional, not utilitarian in nature, based as it is not on utilitarian judgments about social stability but on an empathic rapport with God and nature.

For the spiritualist, organisms are more basic than dead matter, the latter being mere vestiges of the former, and the very concept of an 'impersonal force' is alien to him.

Conclusion: What Do These Authors Propose?

Each of these authors repeatedly references the invigorating effects of spiritualism. Too much rationalism is morbid, they seem to be saying, the implication being that at least some spiritualism is necessary for mental health.

But *is* this in fact what they are saying? Are they advocating a return to a condition of spiritualism? Do they want us to take Rousseau's advice and revert a condition of innocent savagery?

I would suggest a very different reading. Their position, I propose, is not that we *should* be more spiritual, but that we are *already* spiritual, even though we tend not to recognize the manifestations of our spiritualism for what they are. What these authors are saying about spiritualism is similar to what Freud says about sexuality. According to Freud, we cannot become asexual. What we *can* do is wrongly *believe* ourselves to be asexual and, on that basis, make life-decisions that thwart our sexuality and thereby undermine our biological condition. According to James, Otto, and Eliade, so I am suggesting, we cannot become non-spiritual. What we *can* do is wrongly believe that we are non-spiritual---possibly because we have erroneously come to see rationalism as a rejection, as opposed to a rarefied extension,

of our spiritualism—and on that basis adopt lifestyles that contravene our ineradicably spiritual natures.

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[1] James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience: Complete and Unabridged (Illustrated) (p. 15). CrossReach Publications. Kindle Edition.

[2] James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience: Complete and Unabridged (Illustrated) (p. 15). CrossReach Publications. Kindle Edition.

[3] James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience: Complete and Unabridged (Illustrated) (p. 15). CrossReach Publications. Kindle Edition.

[4] James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience: Complete and Unabridged (Illustrated) (p. 21). CrossReach Publications. Kindle Edition.

[5] James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience: Complete and Unabridged (Illustrated) (p. 21). CrossReach Publications. Kindle Edition.

[6] Judaism officially came into existence 5780 years ago; and it did so, strikingly, when Moses introduced the written word, in the form of the Decalogue, to the Israelites.